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(128) THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN RACISM ON CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA¹

Linda Naicker

Introduction

The origins of European racism can be traced to the nineteenth century when a pioneer in the study of comparative anatomy and skull analysis, Professor Johann Blumenbach, developed the idea that the people of Europe belonged to one race.² Blumenbach claimed that Europeans represented the highest racial type within the human species. This newly established racial order set the stage for racial formation in European colonies and was used to justify European domination, paternalism and imperialism. These scientific and scholarly developments in Europe coincided with missionary expansion into Africa and other newly discovered continents and promulgated dispossession, discrimination and subjugation through racial prejudice in all spheres of life. This article traces the development of European racism and examines its impact on Christianity in Africa from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

The Roots of Racism in Africa

In his book 'Origin of Species', published in 1859, British naturalist Charles Darwin asserted that a species' ability to survive was determined by a natural selection of inherited variations. Darwin's species thesis led to the development of race theory, in which Africans were placed in the category of inferior intermediates in the chain of human existence.³ The fields of sociology, psychology, anthropology, theology, biology and medicine became instruments to prove the inferiority of various race groups in comparison to the white race and maintain patriarchal dominance over colonized peoples. Influential scientists in the field of eugenics⁴ provided a scientific brand of racism which determined variables of phenotype, intelligence and ability to achieve, in terms of civilization or culture, based on genetics.⁵ This led to the treatment of Africans as sub-human and justified European domination and exploitation.⁶

The science of eugenics was contested in the twentieth century, with scientists finding little evidence of the existence of biologically different race groups. Scientists found that the average genetic difference between two randomly selected individuals is 0.2% of all the genes and that the physical traits used to

¹ 'Racism' is defined as a social group or cultural entity that denies the dignity of another group and leads to the ultimate assertion that this group is superior and demonstrates a desire to dominate. See World Council of Churches, 'Program to Combat Racism' <https://www.waluka.org/struggle/collection/WCC>.

² Gill Sutton, 'The Layering of History: A Brief Look at Eugenics, the Holocaust and Scientific Racism in South Africa', *Yesterday and Today*, no. 1, (May 2007): 22-23.

'Race' can be defined as a social phenomenon in which contested systems of meaning serve as the connection between physical features and personal characteristics. See Ian F. Haney-Lopez, 'The Social Construction of Race', in *Critical Race Theory*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 63.

³ G. Sutton, 'The Layering of History', , 22-23.

⁴ The science of eugenics was developed as an off-shoot of the Darwinian Theory in Britain in the 1800s. Sir Francis Galton coined the term to mean 'well-born'. He claimed that biologically-determined leadership qualities were inherent traits of the British ruling class. See Linda Naicker, 'The Role of Eugenics and Religion in the Construction of Race in South Africa', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* Vol. 38, no. 2, (December 2012): 209-220.

⁵ Naicker, 'The Role of Eugenics and Religion in the Construction of Race in South Africa', 211.

⁶ Naicker, 'The Role of Eugenics and Religion in the Construction of Race in South Africa', 212.

distinguish individuals are determined by 0.1% of all the genes, proving that there is only one race – the human race.⁷

Before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European involvement with Africa was largely transitory, with limited control of foreign lands. The dawn of the Industrial Revolution made Europe the master of manufacturing and gave new impetus for overseas exploration. Europeans in Africa and other newly discovered regions now began to think in terms of domination and colonialism, and consequently began to extend their settlements.⁸ Europe's involvement with Africa became characterised by aggression, in the forms of political belligerence, destroying ancient kingdoms, tearing down societies, vigorously imposing European forms of thought and education on African peoples and imposing a European brand of Christianity on African people.

Christianity and Racism in Africa

According to Villa-Vicencio, for the most part the missionary endeavour coincided with the European age of expansion. The history of missionary expansion followed the same plan as the history of colonization. Churches in Africa and other European colonies became colonial stations for churches in Europe.⁹ The prevailing sentiment was that European civilization and Christianity were indistinguishable.

The denigration suffered by Africans on the basis of race is well documented, particularly by proponents of Black and African Theologies, as is the belief that, in many ways, eighteenth and nineteenth-century Christianity collaborated with colonial oppressors in disparaging Africans.¹⁰ The ruthless attack on the African psyche was intended to denigrate the African person and despoil the African heritage. In the words of Archbishop Tutu:¹¹

The worst crime that can be laid at the door of the white man (who, it must be said, has done many a worthwhile and praiseworthy thing for which we are always thankful) is not our economic, social and political exploitation, however reprehensible that might be; no, it is that his policy succeeded in filling most of us with a self-disgust and self-hatred. This has been the most violent form of colonialism, our spiritual and mental enslavement, which we have suffered from, that can only be called a religious or spiritual schizophrenia.

There exists a plethora of literature that shows the association between the colonial mission to Africa and the Christian mission to Africa.¹² Explorers, missionaries and traders became representatives of European colonial interests in Africa, resulting in Africa's vulnerability to colonization and domination. By 1914, with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, Africa had been partitioned and occupied by the imperial powers of Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Belgium, Spain and Italy.¹³ Christianity came to Africa at the price of African people's freedoms, traditions and communities.

⁷ Haney-Lopez, 'The Social Construction of Race', 164.

⁸ Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Missions*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 211-214.

⁹ Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Between Christ and Caesar: Classic Contemporary Texts on Church and State* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1986), 170.

¹⁰ See Desmond Tutu, 'Black Theology and African Theology – Soulmates or Antagonists' in *A Reader in African Theology*, ed. John Parrat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 37-44.

¹¹ Tutu, 'Black Theology and African Theology – Soulmates or Antagonists', 37.

¹² See John Parrot, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹³ A. Adu Boahen (ed.), *General History of Africa VII: Africa under Colonial Domination 1880-1935* (London: James Curry, 1990), 320; J. F. Ade Ajaji (ed.), *General History of Africa: Africa in the 19th Century until the 1880s* (London: James Curry, 1998), 300-320.

The Christian Response to European Racism in Africa

At its 2nd Assembly in 1954, the World Council of Churches (WCC) conveyed the conviction that any form of segregation based on race, colour or ethnicity is contrary to the gospel. It called its member churches to work towards the abolition of segregation and discrimination within their own life and society. The Geneva Conference on Church and Society in 1966 raised a strong voice against the sin of racial arrogance and oppression. At the 4th WCC Assembly in Uppsala in 1969, the WCC identified racism practised by the white-skinned against the darker-skinned as one of the world's basic problems and a blatant denial of the Christian faith. The WCC therefore set the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) in motion worldwide. The PCR is regarded as one of the most significant expressions of faith in world Christianity. Its objectives included providing financial aid to racially oppressed groups and organizations, supporting victims of racial injustice and promoting social justice.¹⁴

The 1950s signified a new era in church and political life in Africa, when African people demanded freedom from their colonial oppressors. By 1961, eighteen countries had received independence. This prompted the churches in Africa to form an ecumenical body to deal collaboratively with their new responsibilities. The All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) was established in 1963 and was tasked with dealing with the challenges of racism, civil war, the refugee problem and other pertinent issues facing the African continent.¹⁵ At their 3rd Assembly in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1974, the issue of the liberation of Africa was discussed. The general secretary of the AACC, Burgess Carr, explained that those who resorted to the use of violence against oppressive regimes in South Africa, Rhodesia and Portugal were not condemned for their actions.¹⁶ Portugal relinquished its rule over Mozambique and Angola in 1975 and in 1980 Robert Mugabe's socialist liberation movement took power in Rhodesia after a landslide election victory.¹⁷ The question then became whether South Africa would attain independence next.

Africa's Last Bastion of White Supremacy

South Africa became the last country whose racial policy was based on white supremacy. Christian concern grew rapidly as structural racism heaped tyranny on the lives of the country's black majority population by the white minority population. For example, a missionary policy document published by the Dutch Reformed Church in 1935 stated that Afrikaners fear equality between black and white and the consequent racial fusion such equality may engender. The document went on to state that Blacks and Coloureds must develop apart from Europeans. The policy laid the foundation for the Dutch Reformed Church's stance on race relations in South Africa.¹⁸

The National Party, consisting of a large number of Dutch Reformed Church leaders, came into power in 1948. Historians maintain that, to an extent, the racist ideology of the Dutch Reformed Church had its roots in the convictions of a secret Afrikaner group, the Broederbond. The Broederbond believed that the Afrikaner nation was placed in Southern Africa by God.¹⁹ By 1933, the Broederbond had over 1,000 members, with the principle influence being wielded by a small group of academics steeped in neo-

¹⁴ Jeremiah Manari, 'Special Projects of the WCC: The Project on Women and the Programme to Combat Racism', in *Essays and Exercises in Ecumenism*, ed. Christo Lombaard (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999), 307-325.

¹⁵ James Amanze, 'Some Large Ecumenical Organizations of the African Continent', in *Essays and Exercises in Ecumenism*, ed. Christo Lombaard (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999), 137-149.

¹⁶ J. Adonis and Joan A. Millard, 'Christianity in South Africa since 1948', in *A History of Christianity in South Africa*, eds. J. W. Hofmeyr and Gerald J. Pillay (Pretoria: HAUM Tertiary, 1994), 280.

¹⁷ Shubane Khehla 'The Black Consciousness Movement: The Soweto Uprising of 1976', in *New History of South Africa*, eds. Hermann Giliomee, Bernard Mbenga (Cape Town: NB Publishers, 2007), 359-361.

¹⁸ Adonis and Millard, 'Christianity in South Africa since 1948', 254.

¹⁹ Adonis and Millard, 'Christianity in South Africa since 1948', 254.

Calvinist thought. Many politicians were members of the Broederbond as well as the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Shubane states that a 1934 Broederbond pamphlet declared, 'The Afrikanerdom shall reach its ultimate destiny of domination in South Africa... Brothers, our solution for South Africa's troubles [are] not that this or that party shall gain the upper hand, but that the Afrikaner Broederbond shall rule South Africa.'²⁰

A Dutch Reformed Church synod in 1946 found that the Broederbond was not in conflict with the Bible or Christian principles. In 1947, a DRC congress took place in Johannesburg, the proceedings of which were published in a booklet entitled 'Kerk en Stad' (Church and State), giving guidelines for the white Dutch Reformed Church's policy towards other racial groups. The congress highlighted the need for segregation of white and black as well as the conviction that the church must take the lead role in drafting a workable racial policy. The document was finalized in 1951 under the title, 'Rapport oor die Skriftuurlike Gronde van Rasse-apartheid' ('Report on the Scriptural Basis for Racial Apartheid').²¹

Christianity can legitimise racist ideology, show disinterest in the face of racism or act as a mechanism of radical transformation. Many South African clergy, including the likes of Ambrose Reeves, Trevor Huddleston, Beyers Naudé, Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak raised their voices against the racist ideology of the South African government. The WCC's Programme to Combat Racism was highly controversial among the churches in South Africa. It supported reflection and action among churches in Southern Africa and provided direct humanitarian support to liberation movements.²²

The Kairos Document,²³ released in 1985, produced by a number of theologians, lay people and clergy, was signed by 150 people. It appealed to Christian churches to oppose civil authority, raise their voices against apartheid and stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. It criticized white Christian privilege for not defending oppressed people being tortured by the apartheid state. The document went on to name the Dutch Reformed Churches as being the most prominent proponent of the apartheid government's racial policies.

Two documents published in the late 1980s, 'A Relevant Pentecostal Witness' and 'The Road to Damascus', called upon South African Christians to reject injustice and hypocrisy which is contrary to the gospel.²⁴ South Africa obtained freedom from the oppression of apartheid in 1994.

The legacy of South Africa's racist past has far-reaching consequences for its future. Economic injustice is rife and the issue of land distribution is still a source of tension. Political corruption, unemployment, a weakening health care system and lack of service delivery have negative effects on the country, most especially on the poorest of the poor. While the nation is no longer legally defined by race, race is still a thorny issue. Notable amongst South Africa's problems is the xenophobic violence by South Africans against foreigners from other parts of the continent. This is testament to the bitterness and division that is still prevalent in South African society.

The churches and ecumenical organizations need to take a collective stand to deal with what can only be referred to as a devastating crisis. Just as they made a concerted effort to eradicate institutionalized racism in Africa, so too there needs to appear a moment of truth, a *kairos*, a point of reckoning, where xenophobic violence becomes unequivocally targeted and eradicated. What is most clear with regard to xenophobic violence in South Africa is that discrimination produces social chaos and life-threatening mayhem. The

²⁰ Shubane, 'The Black Consciousness Movement: The Soweto Uprising of 1976', 289.

²¹ Adonis and Millard, 'Christianity in South Africa Since 1948', 254.

²² See The World Council of Churches, 'Programme to Combat Racism, Struggle for Freedom', <https://www.aluka.org/struggle/collection/WCC> (accessed 1 April, 2015).

²³ Kairos Theologians. *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Churches: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*, Revised Second Edition, (Braamfontein: Skotaville, 1986).

²⁴ Theological Education by Extension College, *Exploring our African Christian World: Workbook A* (Turffontein, 2011), 1-15.

fundamental values of equality, dignity and opportunity for all human beings must become the social norm in Africa and, most especially, in post-apartheid South Africa.

Conclusion

The historical development and impact of racism on African Christianity and the Christian response to it points the way for how we must address all forms of oppression in God's world. Wherever racism, xenophobia, inhumanity, indignity and exploitation exist, the church must take a stand. The words of liberation theologian Allan Boesak still ring true today, as they did a decade before the last racist regime in Africa fell:

Violence, greed and the demonic distortion of human values continue to destroy God's world and God's people. Economic exploitation is escalating, rather than abating, and economic injustice is still the dominant reality in the relationship between rich and poor.²⁵

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²⁵ Alan Boesak *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1984), 154.

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